

**THE NECESSITY
OF MEMBERSHIP IN
A TRUE CHURCH**

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2017 Reformed Witness Committee
Hope Protestant Reformed Church

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Scripture cited is taken from the Authorized (King James) Version

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THE BELGIC CONFESSION, ARTICLE 28

EVERY ONE IS BOUND TO JOIN HIMSELF TO THE TRUE CHURCH

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assemblage of those who are saved, and out of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them. And that this may be better observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it; yea, though they should suffer death or bodily punishment.

Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.

1 TIMOTHY 3:15

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

CONTENTS

Publisher's Foreword	7
Preface	9
Part One	11
Introduction	13
The Necessary Membership	14
The Marks of a True Church	19
The Marks of a False Church	23
The Nature of the Necessary Membership in a True Church.	24
The Believer's Calling.	27
Part Two	31

PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

This booklet is published by the Reformed Witness Committee (RWC) of Hope Protestant Reformed Church. With the oversight of the consistory, the committee labors on behalf of the congregation to disseminate throughout the world distinctly Protestant Reformed doctrines based on the word of God and the Reformed confessions.

In 2016 Hope church had the privilege of celebrating her one hundredth anniversary as a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. This booklet is the expanded text of a public lecture sponsored by the RWC on November 11, 2016, and held in connection with the celebration of Hope's anniversary. We thank God for his covenantal faithfulness to Hope church these past one hundred years.

The lecturer and author of this booklet is a son of Hope church. He is the great-grandson of Jennie Engelsma, a charter member of Hope, the grandson of Charles and Lena Engelsma and the son of Dewey and Dena Engelsma, former members of Hope church.

An audio recording of this lecture is available at the committee's website, www.hopeprchurch.org, under the resources tab on the home page. The lecture is also available on CD. A CD can be requested by email to hoperwc@gmail.com or by mail to the RWC at 1580 Ferndale Ave SW, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 49534.

Besides *The Necessity of Membership in a True Church*, the committee has published the following six booklets:

The Building of a Home: Proverbs 24:1-4 by Professor
Herman Hanko

The Children of the Promise by Rev. Herman Hoeksema

Christ's Predetermined Death by Rev. Robert C. Harbach

Phebe: An Example for the Christian Woman by Professor Herman Hanko

Study in Eschatology by Rev. Jason Kortering

What It Means to be Reformed by Professor Herman Hanko

To obtain any of these booklets, contact the RWC or view the digital versions on the committee's website under the resources tab on the home page.

Reformed Witness Committee

PREFACE

No one, whether Christian member of a true church, professing Christian member of an apostate or apostatizing church, or unbelieving non-member of any church, can escape the life-or-death, spiritual force of this booklet.

Nor should he.

Nor do the writer and publisher of the work intend that anyone should escape this force.

By God's appointment church membership *is* a life-or-death matter.

Outside the church—a *true* church, as clearly, unmistakably, manifest by distinct, identifying marks—is no salvation. And the gradual loss of these marks by a church signals not merely an unfortunate development with which the member of such a church can live, albeit unhappily, but impending ecclesiastical and spiritual disaster.

There are false churches, and gradually to lose the marks is gradually to become a false church, within which is no salvation.

This is the warning of this booklet.

At the same time, the booklet celebrates the high honor of membership in a true church, as it also proclaims life in the church. According to 1 Timothy 3:15, a true church is “the house of God... the pillar and ground of the truth.” To live with God himself in his house is eternal life. To participate in being pillar and ground of the truth is genuine glory.

The booklet consists of two parts. The first is the expanded text of a public lecture on the subject of church membership delivered under the auspices of the Reformed Witness Committee of Hope Protestant Reformed Church. The second part is the speaker's

answers to questions, some provocative, raised by the audience at the conclusion of the speech.

In both its parts, this booklet argues the Reformed conviction and contention that “outside the [true] church is no salvation.”

Both author and publisher are convinced that the content of the booklet is urgent for all Protestants, particularly Reformed Protestants, at a time when many “sit loose” to church membership.

David J. Engelsma

January 2017

PART ONE

THE NECESSITY OF MEMBERSHIP IN A TRUE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

John Calvin wrote that whoever has God for his Father has the church for his mother. He was referring to the local, instituted congregation of believers and their children. Calvin's statement indicated the importance of the church. God conceives, rears, and preserves his blood-bought children in the church. The statement also was a warning to those outside the church. They were not only without a spiritual mother. They were also without a heavenly Father.

The truth of Calvin's statement is clear in 1 Timothy 3:15: "That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." This text does not expressly call the church the *mother* of believers, but it does indicate the close relationship between having God as one's Father and church membership. The house of God is where one's divine Father lives and where one has fellowship with him. This house of God is "the church of the living God." But this church, where God dwells and where alone, therefore, humans can have fellowship with God, is not every religious organization with the name church. It is the congregation that shows itself to be a *true* church by being "the pillar and ground of the truth."

Membership in a true church is *necessary*. I know this by experience. I look back over my life and ask, "Where would I, my wife, our children, and our grandchildren be apart from membership in true churches of God? What would be the nature of our spiritual lives? How would it have gone with our family life? Outside of true churches of God, what would even our physical lives be like? But the necessity of membership in a true church is not only, or even mainly, a matter of experience. It is the clear teaching of the Reformed creeds and of scripture, as will be demonstrated.

The calling to membership in a true church is urgent in our day. It is urgent for members in all churches. It is especially urgent for those who are content to remain outside any church. A prevalent, powerful, spreading evil in our day is the disparagement, and even repudiation, of membership in a true church. Multitudes are perfectly content to remain members of churches that plainly are becoming false churches, if these churches have not already become false. People have their reasons for remaining, but they remain.

So far has the despising of church membership developed in our day that many, including some who call themselves conservative and Reformed, abandon church membership altogether. This is what the house church movement really is: rejection altogether of church membership. A house church is not a church. A few years ago, hundreds, if not thousands, of people who regarded themselves as conservative Christians withdrew from their churches at the command of the radio speaker Harold Camping. For their own salvation (so they said), as well as for the worship of God, they contented themselves with listening to Brother Harold on the radio. They were content with despising the church of God.

In the midst of the threatening developments in these last days of the ignoring and even rejecting of this truth, we do well to hear and heed the admonition of scripture and the Reformed confessions that membership in a true church is necessary.

THE NECESSARY MEMBERSHIP

What is necessary is membership in a visible, instituted church, a congregation that can be seen, especially, as a gathering for worship on Sunday and that is properly organized, or instituted. No one may evade the admonition to church membership by responding, “I belong to the invisible, holy, catholic church of Jesus Christ, even though I am not a member of a visible institute, or organization—a local congregation.”

I am quick to add that in an important, even essential, respect the church *is* the holy, catholic (universal) church made up of all God’s elect in all ages, out of all nations, peoples, and races. This is the church as she originates in the eternal decree of election, as God sees the church, as we will first see her at Christ’s second coming, and as she is being gathered by Jesus Christ throughout history everywhere on earth. At present this elect bride of Christ is invisible. She is not an institute but a spiritual body.

Of this one, universal, and at present invisible church, Jesus spoke in Matthew 16:18: “Upon this rock I will build my church.” To this one, universal, and invisible church, Paul referred in Ephesians 5:25: “Christ...loved the church, and gave himself for it.” We Reformed believers confess the truth of the church in this essential respect in the Heidelberg Catechism:

What dost thou believe concerning the Holy Catholic Church?

That out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, the Son of God, by his Spirit and Word, gathers, defends, and preserves for himself unto everlasting life, a chosen communion in the unity of the true faith; and that I am, and forever shall remain, a living member of the same.¹

But scripture also speaks of and teaches the truth of the church in another important respect. This important respect is that the church is a visible, instituted body of believers and their children, in a certain place at a certain time. The same Jesus who said in Matthew 16 that he would build his church taught in Matthew 18:17 that if our fellow Christian sins against us and will not repent when we rebuke him, we must “tell it unto the church.” Telling the church is impossible with regard to the invisible, universal body of Christ made up of the elect. The reference must be to some visible institute with human officebearers who can hear our case, make a judgment, and then take appropriate action. In this sense of the Bible’s teaching about the church, there is not one church, but there are many churches.

Revelation 2 and 3 address seven churches in Asia Minor. Paul wrote the epistle of Galatians to the “*churches* of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2; emphasis added). Most of the books of the New Testament were written to various churches in various locations, for example, 1 Corinthians, to the “church of God which is at Corinth” (1:2).

The Reformed confessions faithfully reflect this aspect of the Bible’s teaching about the church. The same Heidelberg Catechism that defines the church as the one, universal, and invisible body of Christ made up of the elect, and them only, also teaches that the fourth commandment of the law of God requires “that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church, to learn the Word of God, to use the holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms.”² Here, obviously, the church of God is a visible organization and gathering in a certain place, at a particular time in history, whose

1 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:324–25.

2 Heidelberg Catechism A. 103, in *ibid*, 3:345.

membership is not all the elect but a certain, limited number of persons. This membership is not necessarily only elect humans.

These two distinct truths about the church do not imply that there are, in fact, two different kinds of churches—one being the universal, invisible number of the elect and the other being the visible organization, or congregation. On the contrary, there is the closest relationship between the church as the assembly of the elect, which is now invisible and which is gathered from the beginning to the end of history, and the church as a visible institution in a certain place at a certain time in history. The local, visible institute, or congregation, *is* the universal, invisible body of Christ, made up of the elect, as the universal, invisible body *takes form in history and manifests herself*. Or to state the same truth differently, the catholic, invisible church of Christ *takes form and manifests herself* in every visible, instituted congregation—if that congregation is a true church.

Just as God desired to take bodily form in, and reveal himself as, a human in the man Jesus, so the invisible body of Christ—the church of election—desires to take visible form in the instituted church.

The practical importance of this truth about the relationship between the universal, invisible church of the eternal decree and the local, visible congregation is great, indeed enormous. Let no one who despises and rejects the instituted church claim to love the church as the invisible body of Christ! His claim is false! The claim is as impossible as it would be for one to claim to love God while despising and rejecting Jesus, who is God in the flesh.

Let no one say that he believes the church as the invisible, universal body of the elect, although he has no use for the visible, instituted church! He does not believe the truth of the church! How can one believe the church that he has not seen when he is unbelieving concerning the church that he has seen?

Yes, and let no one claim to be a member of the universal, invisible body who holds in contempt membership in this church's manifestation in the visible church! He is not a member of the universal church of Christ! On the contrary, he despises the universal body of Christ.

So intimate, so very close, so one and the same are the invisible church of election and the instituted congregation that the Belgic Confession moves from an explanation of the one, universal, invisible church of election in article 27 to an explanation of the

church institute in article 28 with no indication of a change of subject, indeed, as though it continued to treat one and the same subject.

Article 27 confesses the truth about the holy church that “is spread and dispersed over the whole world,” the church that “hath been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof.”³ With no indication whatsoever of a change of subject, article 28 confesses the truth about a church from which “no person...ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it,” a church with “doctrine” and “discipline.”⁴ The church of article 28 is unmistakably a visible, instituted congregation.

Article 28 begins as though it were simply continuing the confession about the universal, invisible church of article 27:

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assemblage of those who are saved, and out of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it.⁵

Some criticize the Belgic Confession for not plainly distinguishing the subject of article 28 from that of article 27, that is, the church institute from the universal church. Some have even proposed a revision of the Confession that would make such a distinction explicit. But this criticism and this proposed revision are a mistake. For the instituted congregation *is* the universal body of Christ, *in a particular manifestation of the body of Christ*. The universal body of Christ takes visible form in the institute. The universal church and the instituted congregation are one and the same church of Jesus Christ.

Membership in the *instituted* church—the organized assembly of believers and their children that is visible and exists in a certain place at a certain time—is *necessary*.

This raises the important questions: What constitutes the *institution* of the church? What is it that makes a gathering of believers and their children a genuine, proper, authorized institute?

3 Belgic Confession 27, in *ibid.*, 3:417.

4 Belgic Confession 28, in *ibid.*, 3:418.

5 Belgic Confession 28, in *ibid.*, 3:418.

This becomes practical in our day with the rising of the house church movement. A father holds some kind of a religious ceremony on Sunday morning with his family, and perhaps a few friends, and calls the assembly a house church. Thus he claims the honorable name church for his gathering. But the claim is false because the assembly is not properly instituted according to biblical requirements. Lacking institution, the assembly is no church, whether house or otherwise, no matter how pious the people and how solemn the ceremony.

Therefore, the practitioners of the house church movement despise the church of God and are outside the church—outside the church in the sense that they have no reason to suppose that they are members of the invisible, holy, universal body of Christ, elected in Christ and destined for eternal life. Indeed, they have good reason to conclude that they are not members of the universal body of Christ. Almost needless to say, this judgment of the members of a house church applies to the movement that deliberately repudiates the church institute. Those who believe but are prohibited from instituting the church by a hostile government are not implicated by the judgment, although their circumstances are certainly dire.

There is the church institute, where God has appointed and installed men to occupy and exercise the three offices, or official positions, that make a gathering of believing people the church of God. These offices are minister of the word, or teaching elder; ruling elder; and deacon. By these offices Jesus Christ himself performs the work that blesses and saves the members of the church. By the minister, or pastor, Jesus Christ himself proclaims the living Word of the gospel. By the ruling elder, Jesus Christ himself governs and protects the congregation. By the deacons Jesus Christ himself ministers to the material needs of the materially poor of the church. By these three offices, all of which are necessary for the institution of the church, Jesus Christ is head of the church and present in it.

Without these offices there is no instituted church—no church at all. Neither is there the vital, saving work of Jesus Christ in the gathering. Indeed, Jesus Christ himself is not present in the assembly, as he is present in the instituted church, if it be a true church.

The necessity of these offices for the very existence of the church as institute is abundantly plain in the Bible, to say nothing of the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds. The advocates and practitioners

of the house church movement are without excuse. Acts 14:23 records that Paul “ordained...elders in every church.” First Timothy 3, which assumes that all Christians are members of the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth, begins with the solemn description of the qualifications of the man who holds “the office of a bishop” in the church (vv. 1–7) and of the man who is a deacon (vv. 8–13), speaking expressly in verse 13 of the “office of a deacon.” Philippians 1:1 addresses the letter to the saints at Philippi “with the bishops and deacons.”

That the bishops, or elders, are of two kinds is the teaching of 1 Timothy 5:17, which distinguishes elders who rule from elders who both rule and labor in the word and doctrine. The latter is the minister of the gospel.

Of the visible church that is instituted in these three offices, it is necessary to be a member.

If, and only if, that institute is a true church!

THE MARKS OF A TRUE CHURCH

It is not enough to be member of some instituted church or other. There are true churches and false churches. There are churches that once were true, but are now becoming false. What is necessary is membership in a true church. This necessity implies grave danger for one who finds himself in a church that is in the process of becoming false.

Since membership in a true church is necessary, and since becoming a false church is a real possibility, believers must have clear, certain, identifying marks of a true church. God gives the true church these marks. He reveals to believers what these marks are. The Reformed creed, the Belgic Confession, states these marks on the basis of the Bible in article 29. No Reformed person, therefore, will have any excuse for not knowing or recognizing the marks.

The marks are three. First, and primarily, the mark of the true church is “the pure doctrine of the gospel.” Second, the mark is “the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ.” The third mark is the exercise of “church discipline” in dealing with public sin as it appears in the church and in working with a member of the church who openly lives impenitently in some sin.⁶

⁶ Belgic Confession 29, in *ibid.*, 3:419.

These marks are clear. They are unmistakable. The Confession, having identified the marks, immediately adds: “Hereby the true Church may certainly be known,” concluding, “from which no man has a right to separate himself.”⁷

In our ecclesiastically ignorant, self-willed, and foolish age, it is necessary to call attention to what the marks are not, to what ought not to determine church membership. Size is not the mark of a true church. Here, I recall the remark of the spokeswoman of a group of visitors who were attending the services in my first congregation. The congregation was small, only some twenty families, and struggling as small congregations characteristically do. In addition, the congregation was financially burdened with the support of a Christian school. The presence of the visitors for some months was an encouragement to the congregation. It was a disappointment, therefore, that, after a Sunday evening service, the spokeswoman informed us that the group had decided not to join the congregation. But the reason was revealing: “We like the worship, but you are so small; we had more people in Sunday school in our old church back East than you have members of the entire congregation.” I exclaimed, “But size is not the mark of a true church.” To no avail. Size determined the membership of that group.

The friendliness of the pastor and of the congregation is not a mark.

The church’s reputation in the neighborhood or in the Reformed community is not a mark.

Opportunity for the use of the members’ gifts is not a mark.

Enthusiasm for missions and evangelism is not a mark.

This is not to say that some, or even all, of these considerations are unimportant. But they are not the *marks* of the true church. They do not *determine* membership in a church. The marks are the soundness of the preaching, the right administration of the sacraments, and the proper, faithful exercise of church discipline.

Scripture identifies the true church by these marks and makes these marks the rule of one’s church membership:

15. But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

⁷ Belgic Confession 29, in *ibid.*, 3:420.

16. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory (1 Tim. 3:15–16).

Here the “church of the living God,” the institute with its bishops and deacons, is identified as “the pillar and ground of the truth.” Apart now from this description of the church being the mark of the true church, what an amazing privilege and calling of the church this is: she holds up the truth in the world! No other organization does this. Apart from the church—the *true* church—truth falls to the ground! Truth disappears from the world! The truth of God; the truth of Jesus Christ; the truth of the misery of humanity; the truth of the way of salvation; the truth of eternal life; the truth of a holy life; the truth of the second coming and of the final judgment; the truth of the resurrection of the body and a new world; and more! The individual member of the church shares in this privilege and calling. He or she is involved in being the pillar and ground of the truth.

The true church and her members must have a living, strong awareness of this honor. The true church is humble. She does not have an inferiority complex.

But being the pillar and ground of the truth is the mark of a *true*, instituted church. In light of the rest of 1 Timothy and, indeed, of all the rest of the Bible, there is no doubt what the “truth” is, of which the church is the pillar and ground: it is the truth of the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ, with all its content, from the truth of creation and the fall to the second coming and the resurrection of the dead. First Timothy 3:16 spells out in some detail what the truth is that identifies the true church. It is the great “mystery of godliness,” which has as its content the following confession by the true church. “Without controversy” in the Authorized Version is literally “as a matter of confession,” so that what follows in verse 16 is the content of what the true church confesses and that with respect to what the true church is the pillar and ground.

“God was manifest in the flesh.” This is the wonder of the incarnation of God the Son in the man Jesus, which implies the truth of the Trinity.

The incarnate Son of God was “justified in the Spirit,” that is, justified as the representative of all his sinful people by his death as

substitutionary atonement for their sins. This implies that the elect sinner is justified by faith alone in Jesus.

Jesus was “seen of angels” in his bodily resurrection, which proved that his death satisfied the justice of God and which made him Lord over all.

After his resurrection and ascension into heaven, Jesus was “preached unto the Gentiles” as the one and only savior of the elect in the whole human race. The implication is that the church is a universal church.

In that Jesus “was believed on in the world,” his efficacious power, the Holy Ghost, is acknowledged. Jesus is not an impotent, would-be savior. This aspect of the true church’s confession also proclaims that salvation is by faith in him, and by faith alone, apart from works and worth.

The truth of which the church is the pillar and ground and that is confessed by the church includes, as its conclusion in 1 Timothy 3:16, “received up into glory.” Jesus’ ascension into heaven was a stage in the glorification of God in the flesh. Jesus sits at God’s right hand and rules all things on God’s behalf, especially the gathering and preservation of his church. The culmination of this glory will be his bodily coming on the cloud for the punishment of all his enemies and for the deliverance and glorification of all who believe on him.

First Timothy 3:15–16 reveals that the one outstanding mark of the true church is that she is the congregation, and by implication the denomination, that upholds the truth by confessing Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as savior and Lord. The whole of the confession that is the content of the truth, of which the church is the pillar and ground (v. 15), is Jesus Christ, his person and saving work. Implied are the sacraments, which are the signs and seals of Jesus and his work of salvation, and church discipline, which safeguards the confession of Jesus.

Where these marks and this confession of Jesus Christ are, there is a true church of God, and there I must be a member and remain a member. Where these marks are lacking and this confession of Jesus is corrupted or denied, there is a false church, and there I may not be a member.

THE MARKS OF A FALSE CHURCH

Since there are also false churches, and since membership in a false church is both contrary to God's will and damning, there must also be clear marks of a false church, and there are. The marks of a false church are not only the lack of the three marks of the true church, but also the perversion of the marks. Perversion of the marks of the true church is often subtle.

The false church preaches, but she preaches not "the pure doctrine of the gospel," but a corrupted and falsified doctrine. The false church does not preach that Jesus is God incarnate, but it does preach that Jesus is a god because he was such a very good man. The false church does not preach that Jesus died to atone for the sins of his people, but it does preach that Jesus' death was special, even "saving," because it is the greatest example of a good man's willingness to die for the benefit of others. The false church does not preach Jesus' death as substitutionary satisfaction of the justice of God in the stead of his elect church, but it does preach that Jesus' death made it possible for all humans to be saved, dependent on the free will of the sinner. The false church does not preach that salvation is by faith alone in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, but it does preach that righteousness and salvation are by faith in Jesus and by the sinner's will and works. The false church does not preach that Jesus the savior is also Lord of all his saved people, calling and empowering them to obey the law of God, but it does preach that Jesus' gracious salvation allows the saved to live as they please, in disobedience to the law of God.

The false church administers sacraments, but she adds to those two that Christ instituted five sacraments of its own pleasure—ceremonies that magnify the false church rather than Jesus. Or the false church administers the sacraments to unworthy recipients, men and women who are living impenitently in public sin. This mark of a false church involves the third mark of a false church.

The false church exercises discipline, but upon those who confess the truth, who are living godly, and who rebuke the false church for her errors and sinful ways, all the while tolerating in the church and at the Lord's supper members whose lives are publicly and grossly ungodly, for example, heretical preachers and theologians; married persons who divorce their mates without biblical ground; married

persons who remarry after divorce; and today practicing sodomites and lesbians.

Thus false churches reject Jesus Christ as the only head of the church. Significantly, the Belgic Confession begins its identification of a false church with these words: “As for the false Church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ.”⁸

The source of all the sin of the false church is its refusal to submit to the word of God. It exalts itself above the word of God.

The true church, in contrast, humbly submits to the word of God, that is, the gospel of holy scripture.

Membership in a false church is forbidden to the believer. If he or she finds himself or herself in such a church, or even in a church that is obviously becoming false, he or she must leave such a church to join a true church.

THE NATURE OF THE NECESSARY MEMBERSHIP IN A TRUE CHURCH

Membership in a true church is necessary. It is not merely recommended, if convenient, but necessary. If it is necessary, it must be carried out regardless of the cost and consequences.

This is the testimony of the Reformed creeds. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, membership in a true church is the requirement of the fourth commandment of the law of God: “that the ministry of the Gospel and schools be maintained; and that I, especially on the day of rest, diligently attend church, to learn the Word of God, to use the holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian alms.”⁹

That the believer is a member of a true church is required, therefore, by one of the ten commandments, indeed, by the first table of the law—the table requiring love for God. At stake in church membership is love for God.

The Belgic Confession is the most explicit and the strongest of the creeds concerning the necessity of membership in a true church. The Confession warns that “no person...ought to withdraw himself,

8 Belgic Confession 29, in *ibid.*, 3:420–21.

9 Heidelberg Catechism A. 103, in *ibid.*, 3:345.

to live in a separate state from it [the true, instituted congregation]. Article 28 continues: “all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it” and adds that this is one’s duty even though a wicked government forbids it—a reality in the days of the writing of the Belgic Confession—so that membership means “death or bodily punishment.” Guido de Brès, the author of the Confession, suffered the extreme penalty for his membership in the true church. The article concludes: “All those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.”¹⁰

How many times, as a pastor, did I not plead with a member who was asking for his membership papers not to leave the church, regardless of wife or husband, or of impending marriage, or of work, or of some hard feelings toward the church! How often did I not finally admonish, in the words of article 28 of the Belgic Confession, “Membership is *necessary!*”

First Timothy 3:15 insists on the necessity of church membership. As necessary as it is physically to live in an earthly house, so necessary is it spiritually to live in the “house of God,” which is what the instituted church is. As foolish and fatal as it would be for a child to abandon his physical house and earthly parents to live outside in the open air, so foolish, fatal, *and wicked* it is for someone to leave the church and the heavenly Father to live outside the house in which God dwells.

And this already indicates the nature of the necessity of membership in a true church.

Outside the church, that is, apart from membership in the true institute, is no salvation!

Here is where people get their hackles up and raise furious objections: “Certainly, church membership is not as serious as salvation.”

But it is this serious!

This is exactly the seriousness of church membership on which the Belgic Confession insists: “Out of it [the true, instituted church] there is no salvation.”¹¹ This is why no one ought to leave, and all ought to join, the true church, according to the Reformed confession.

¹⁰ Belgic Confession 28, in *ibid.*, 3:420–21.

¹¹ Belgic Confession 28, in *ibid.*, 3:420.

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches the same: to be excommunicated from the true church, and this means *righteously*, is to be “excluded... by God himself from the kingdom of Christ.”¹²

The Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession of 1566 is clear and strong:

(OUTSIDE THE CHURCH OF GOD THERE IS NO SALVATION) But as for communicating with the true Church of Christ, we so highly esteem it that we say plainly that none can live before God who do not communicate with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from the same. For as without the ark of Noah there was no escaping when the world perished in the flood; even so do we believe that without Christ, who in the Church offers himself to be enjoyed of the elect, there can be no certain salvation: and therefore we teach that such as would be saved must in no wise separate themselves from the true Church of Christ.¹³

About the Reformed creed in which this statement concerning the necessity of membership in a true church occurs, John H. Leith, renowned Reformed scholar, remarks, “The Second Helvetic Confession was widely accepted and can justly claim to be the most universal of Reformed creeds.”¹⁴ Those who take their church membership lightly and those who loudly object to the insistence on the necessity of membership in a true church for salvation itself as narrow-minded and bigoted show themselves to be outside the Reformed, creedal mainstream and in opposition not to a small group of bigots, but to creedal, Reformed Christianity.

The explanation of the awesome necessity of membership in a true church is that the church is the body of Christ. To be separated from the church is to be separated from the head of this body, who is Jesus Christ. In separation from Christ is no salvation.

There in the church is the life-giving, life-preserving, and life-increasing Spirit of Christ Jesus, working by means of the word, the sacraments, and the oversight of elders. In separation from the church is no enjoyment of the saving work of the Spirit. And then

12 Heidelberg Catechism A. 85, in *ibid.*, 3:338.

13 Second Helvetic Confession 17, in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present Day*, ed. John H. Leith, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 147.

14 Leith, 131.

there are the disastrous effects of separation from the church upon the generations of those who separate themselves. How often as a pastor in the churches did I not hear from parents who were intent on leaving the church, “We know the truth, and we can be saved outside the church.” To which my response invariably was, “If this is true for you, what of your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren?” The Reformed believer does not think individually, of himself only, but he thinks covenantally, also of his posterity.

Nature itself illustrates the necessity of membership in the true church. Suppose, absurdly, that a man’s finger decides to separate from the body and go on its own. What happens to the independent finger?

The necessity of membership for salvation is an urgent admonition in our day of the disparagement of this necessity. But by no means is the salvation of oneself and one’s family the only aspect of this necessity. Outside the church is no participation in and support of the worship of God. Outside the *true* church is no participation in the *pure* worship of God. Here I include not only the public worship at the services on the Lord’s day, but also the care of the poor by the deacons, the work of evangelism and missions, the maintenance of a seminary, and more. All of this may be summed up as one’s contributing to the church’s being “the pillar and ground of the truth,” in the language of 1 Timothy 3:15.

One who leaves, or is content to live in separation from, a true church takes the position that he does not care about the truth of God, of Christ, and of salvation. Every true believer loves and esteems the truth—the full truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ—above all else, certainly above his convenience, indeed, above his physical life. Therefore, for the sake of the pure worship of God in the truth he judges membership in a true church to be necessary for himself and his family.

What follows from this necessity is in part obvious and easily overlooked.

THE BELIEVER’S CALLING

What is obvious is that the believer is called by God himself to be and to remain a member of a church that shows itself true by the unmistakable marks. He may not leave a true church for any reason, including weaknesses that the church may have. He ought to work on the weaknesses, but he may not leave.

If a believer finds himself in a false church—a church lacking the marks or corrupting them—he ought to leave for a true church. He is called to do so regardless of family and friends. He ought to join a true church regardless of distance. Perhaps, this requires moving to another country. This was the issue in Calvin’s controversy with those whom he called “the Nicodemites,” alluding to Nicodemus who supposedly hesitated to join the band of disciples around Jesus because of the cost in doing so. Those Nicodemites would have had to leave France, where the Reformed faith was banned and confessing Reformed believers were persecuted, and likely move to Geneva, Switzerland, where the Reformed worship of God was possible. Calvin proclaimed to them that membership in a true church was necessary, no matter what the cost of membership might be. Confronting the hardships that would entail, some of the French believers hesitated. Some mocked Calvin as a man who thought that the “way to heaven goes through Geneva.” The Nicodemites have their spiritual children in our day. To the admonition that membership in a true church is necessary, they mockingly respond, “You think that only those who are members of your churches will be saved.”

Regardless of hardships and mockery, it is clear that membership in a true church is necessary, as has been proved.

What is not so clear is the calling of the believer who finds himself in a church that is in the process of falling away from the truth and, therefore, from Christ. Apostasy is a reality. An instituted church that has displayed the marks of a true church gradually becomes false. This has happened repeatedly in New Testament history. This happened during the time of the apostles. Revelation 2 and 3 make plain that several, indeed, a majority, of the seven churches, all of which had been established by the apostles, had already by about AD 95 fallen away so far that the apostle John threatened them with the extreme penalty of the removal of the candlestick out of its place (Rev. 2:5).

Second Thessalonians 2 sharply warns true churches that at the end (in which time we are living) there will be “a falling away” of churches, where “falling away” is the translation of the Greek word for apostasy.

All believers in all churches, including those of which I am a member, must be vigilant, must be watchful—not suspicious, but vigilant. They must be vigilant concerning doctrine; the administration of the

sacraments; Christian discipline, whether exercised, not exercised, or exercised wrongly; and purity of worship, which includes everything that goes on in a worship service, including the singing.

This vigilance is primarily the calling of the elders, but it is also the calling and capability of all the members in their office of believer. Revelation 2 and 3 call the members of the churches—not only the elders—to be watchful and to hold fast.

Where there is departure the members may and must object or protest. The officebearers must pay attention to the protests of the members, must take the protests seriously. They may not have the attitude, “Falling away could never happen with us.” It could! No congregation, no denomination, including the denomination to which I belong, is immune to the spirit of the great deceiver and to apostasy.

True churches can become guilty of the folly of complacency. Scripture warns them against this danger. It gives warnings to true churches. The churches of Revelation 2 and 3 had been true churches, in fact, churches established by an apostle. The churches of which I am a member arose from a denomination that was once sound. Within twenty-five years of their founding the churches of which I am member lost more than half their membership to a false doctrine that compromises the gospel of grace, the doctrine of a conditional covenant and a conditional covenantal salvation.

Complacency permits compromise and corruption of the gospel of grace, beginning with a telltale silence about the gospel of grace as though further explanation, defense, and development of the gospel of grace are unnecessary.

Complacency shuts the eyes of the minister, elders, and members of a true church to mal-administration of the sacraments, whether in the preaching of them or in the actual administration of them.

Complacency explains the lack of or misuse of church discipline.

If a church rejects the protest against error and persists in its departure from Christ, the member has both the right and the duty to leave the church that is in the process of losing the marks of a true church for a church that clearly manifests itself as true. Or with others he has the calling to reform the church by instituting a church that has the marks.

This is how the Reformed churches were formed in the sixteenth century.

This is how the churches of which I am a member came into existence in 1924.

This ecclesiastical activity is not easy. It is not pleasant work. It is not what we would want.

But membership in a true church is necessary!

PART TWO

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. If a person believes the gospel but is not a member of an instituted church, does this person perish, thus making Christ's death ineffectual?

If a person believes the gospel, he will be a member of an instituted church. Of course no one who is a true believer in Jesus Christ will perish. The point of the necessity of the membership in a true church is that faith is worked by God in a church. Or if one is converted on the mission field, he is saved with a view to membership in an instituted church, whether the church formed on the mission field or the church that sent the missionary. That faith is worked by God in such a way that part of faith is the conviction that I must remain a member of the church or become a member of the church, whatever the case may be, and there worship God rightly and partake of the means of grace.

2. Rome falsely claims that one must be a member of its church in order to be saved, but salvation is in Christ not a church. How do you differentiate between your teaching and Rome's?

Negatively, this way: the difference is not that Rome thinks it is necessary to be a member of a church and we Protestants think it is unnecessary. Positively, the difference is that Rome thinks it is necessary to be a member of its false church. We maintain that it is necessary to be a member of Christ's true church. That's the difference. That's how we distinguish between Rome's teaching and ours.

With regard to the implied question in the words, "salvation is in Christ," it is certainly true that salvation is in Christ. What must not be forgotten about Christ is that he is the husband of a wife. He lives with his wife, the church, and he lives in his bride, the church, according to the epistle to the Ephesians and other places in the Bible. Christ in whom is salvation is the head of the church. He is the one who is present in the church by his word, the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline. So if you want salvation in Christ, look for him where he is to be found. He is not found outside the true, instituted church.

3. What gives the Belgic Confession authority? Isn't it fallible?

I was speaking to a largely Reformed audience tonight. And that Reformed audience I assumed understood that the Belgic Confession is a secondary authority for all Reformed Christians. We regard the

Belgic Confession and have vowed to have it as an authoritative expression of the truth of the Bible. What the Belgic Confession teaches we have determined is the truth of the Bible, so that we have bound ourselves to the teaching of the Belgic Confession as a faithful expression and teaching of scripture. For all Reformed believers the Belgic Confession is authoritative. It summarizes and simplifies the teaching of the Bible, so that when the Belgic Confession affirms, and has all Reformed believers affirm, that outside the church is no salvation, that is authoritative for us.

What the Belgic Confession teaches is based on scripture, in this case particularly 1 Timothy 3, which I also appealed to. I showed that 1 Timothy 3 speaks of the instituted church, the church of bishops and deacons. About that church it says that it is the house of the living God and the pillar and ground of the truth. Clearly implied is that within that church is salvation. Not outside that church. We look for God as Father and savior in vain outside his house. He lives in his house, which is the original living in a house.

Our living in a house is patterned after his living in a house. If my children want to live with me, when they are little children they have to live in my house. If they go outside my house into the wilderness, they live without their father. And if these little children—which we all are in our relationships to God—try to live without their father outside the house, they die. They show themselves very foolish children besides. So the Belgic Confession in its statement about the necessity of church membership is squarely based on 1 Timothy 3 and other scriptural passages.

In answer to the question, what gives the Belgic Confession its authority, the Bible does.

4. What is one's proper attitude toward and how does one properly treat a fellow church member or family member who removes his church membership from a true church of Jesus Christ?

The proper attitude is not to leave the impression with him that everything is fine, that the relationship between that disobedient family member and myself is the same as it was before he left the true church of Jesus Christ. Fundamentally, my attitude is determined by this: You have left my heavenly Father; you have left my Lord and savior Jesus Christ. When you left them, you left me. You must feel that; you must know that.

This does not mean that I do not have any contact with him anymore. But my contact is rebuke, admonition, and warning. He has severed the fellowship. When he is made to feel that, who knows, God may use that to bring him to repentance and restore him. But in any case, I will not be responsible for his earthly miseries outside the true church or, ultimately, his eternal destiny by giving him the impression that he may leave God and Christ and the true church of Christ and everything remains the same between us.

5. What exactly does the Belgic Confession mean when it states, "It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church"? To what extent does the believer separate himself from such a person?

The context in which that is found in the Belgic Confession helps to determine the meaning. I believe the first application is that believers separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church by not being members with such people in the false churches of which they are members. As a member of a true church, I am separate from those who are members of false churches, and I maintain that separation simply by keeping my membership in a true church.

I think there is also a second aspect of application. This is a strange teaching in our day, when what's called love overrides everything else. A member of a true church, a living believing member of a true church, one who worships God, loves Jesus Christ, and confesses the truth will live in antithetical separation from those who do not belong to the true church. That is, a believer in a true church does not live in sweet fellowship with one who is outside the true church as an unbeliever. Antithesis is spiritual separation. This is an important aspect of the Christian life. We are not one with the world, we are not one with members of false churches, and we show that also by our behavior. We have contact with them. As much as possible in that contact we rebuke them and witness to them, but we don't indicate that we share life with them. We share life with Christ. They do not share that life, and we make that known to them. Separation of ourselves from all those who do not belong to the church is an important aspect of the individual calling of the child of God.

6. Would you stand by your mother's adage, "You need the church more than the church needs you"?

She being dead, yet speaketh. Yes, I need the church more than the church needs me.

7. Can you comment on the thief on the cross? He was saved, but did not belong to a visible church.

That he did not belong to the visible church is true, of course. In effect he had been excommunicated. As a Jew he had been a member of the nation of Israel. He was certainly an unworthy member of that nation. We have to take the special circumstances of that case into consideration. There are such things as deathbed conversions. They are still possible today. It is possible that someone would grow up in the true church, abandon it, live all his life outside the church and on his deathbed be brought to repentance and be saved. In that case he would be an exception, an exception to the rule. That is not the rule. It is not the rule that there are deathbed conversions. Usually, the way a man lives is how a man dies. So we do not observe the exception, but we observe the rule. The rule still stands, although the thief on the cross was an exception.

8. Can you comment on the "electronic church" and its benefit to the shut-ins, to those in hospitals, and the like?

There you have a situation, not that someone removes his membership from the visible church. He remains a member, but God makes it impossible for him to attend the worship services regularly. That is really a different subject than the subject of membership in a true church. In a case like that where God makes it impossible for a church member to attend the services anymore, then tapes and CDs of the worship services are undoubtedly of great spiritual help and blessing. Nothing I have said tonight ought to be taken as any other attitude toward these things than what I have just stated. If, however, a man deliberately refuses to become a member of a true church and contents himself with listening to tapes and CDs, he is no member of a true church, even though the sermons on the tapes and CDs are orthodox. The "electronic church" in reality is not a church.

9. Can you comment on being in a true church where the true preaching of the word is lacking in edification?

I can comment on that in general. First, not every preacher has the same gift for edification, although every preacher ought to be able to edify. One ought to be sure then that the word is lacking in edification rather than that his own appreciation of the word is lacking.

Second, if there actually is the situation that the preaching of the word lacks edification—and that is possible in a true church—the solution is that the elders of the church are vigilant in carrying out their calling.

There are elders in the church for reasons. The elders must be active in their calling; they must be aware of what their calling is. The first calling of an elder is to exercise oversight over the preaching of the word. This means that the elders take heed to the fact that the preaching is lacking in important respects so that it is not edifying. They must make an issue of that with the minister, what the reason for that is, and pursue that. Some may like the minister, and others may not like the minister. I have been in the ministry long enough to know about these things. One thing may not be lacking in the church, and that is that the preaching is edifying. That is absolute necessity. There must be edifying preaching. The elders are to see to it.

10. If there are enough members present could a house church, a gathering of believers, appoint for itself ministers, elders, and deacons and become a true church of Jesus Christ? In other words, how is a new church properly instituted and established?

The answer to the first part of that question is that if a gathering of believers institutes itself by appointing officebearers, it is no longer a house church. It is exactly the thinking of those involved in a house church that they do not need the offices. They do not want officebearers and do not want to be instituted. They want to sit around on a Sunday morning in someone's living room and listen to Brother Harold [Camping] blather on the radio. So a gathering of believers may certainly organize, although in the institution of itself by the appointment of officebearers they ought to have a minister perform the institution. Then they do become a true church of Jesus

Christ, if in other respects they have the marks of a true church. That is how a church is properly instituted and established.

What this possibility makes plain is that the fundamental office in the church is the office of believer. Not the office of bishop or of deacon, but of believer!

11. Can you explain what is meant by the plurality of the church?

I assume that the question refers to what is called the pluriformity, or multiformity, of the church. The idea is that the many, significant differences among the various Protestant churches (denominations)—differences of worship, of church government, of creed, and even of doctrine—are legitimate. The differences are expressions of the full reality of the one, universal body of Christ. Each church with its prominent characteristic brings out one or more of the features of the true church of Christ. Rather than expressing that the differences separate the churches, making oneness of organization impossible until the differences are resolved, the differences encourage some kind of organizational union that is necessary, so that the combination of all the differences will bring out the full, pluriform (or multiform) nature of the one church of Christ. Rome with its pope does justice to the (alleged) Christian reality of the church's government (ignoring the Bible's teaching of the government of each congregation by a body of ruling elders, or bishops); Presbyterianism does justice to the church's concern for sound doctrine (ignoring Rome's doctrine of salvation by works); Anglicanism contributes the element of splendid worship (ignoring the Bible's insistence on simple, sober worship governed by the word of God—the "regulative principle" of worship); and Pentecostalism injects into the mix its supposed Spirit-worked enthusiasm, especially tongues (ignoring that the apostolic age with its speaking in tongues has passed and that the genuine fervor of the church is her zeal of faith in Christ, worked by the Spirit by the preaching of sound doctrine).

This notion of the pluriformity of the church is not biblical. It is not a truth about the church that is found in the Reformed creeds. When noted Reformed theologians acknowledge the pluriformity of the church, they speculate without creedal support.

In fact, pluriformity repudiates the teaching of the Belgic Confession in articles 28 and 29 concerning the true church and the

false church with their marks. According to pluriformity there are not true churches and false churches, but only churches that make their distinctive contributions to the full manifestation of the one church of Christ.

The teaching of the pluriformity of the church promotes the erroneous ecumenicity that produces the beast out of the earth of Revelation 13, that is, the false church that assists the antichristian world power at the end.

12. Could you talk about dead orthodoxy? Why isn't orthopraxy one of the marks? Christ said to Sardis, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful" (Rev. 3:1–2).

In reality, this question with its implied rebuke is not directed to me, but to article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

Orthopraxy is right practice, or orthodox behavior. Article 29 does not make orthopraxy a mark of *the true church*, whereas it does make the preaching of "the pure doctrine of the gospel"—orthodoxy—the first and chief mark. However, article 29 does make orthopraxy a mark of *Christians*, the members of the church:

With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians, namely, by faith; and when they have received Jesus Christ the only Saviour, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof.¹

Even in the case of Christians, the first and fundamental mark is "faith," which faith is primarily doctrinal, an orthodox knowledge of all "that God has revealed to us in his Word."²

The thought of the Belgic Confession is certainly not that orthopraxy on the part of the members of the church is unimportant. Nor is the thought that carelessness of life is not a threat to the members of the true church. But the thought of the article, expressing the conviction of the Reformed faith, is that the preaching of the pure doctrine of the

1 Belgic Confession 29, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:420.

2 Heidelberg Catechism A. 21, in *ibid.*, 3:313.

gospel—the gospel of salvation by grace alone by faith alone—will, by the power of the Spirit of Christ, produce holy Christians, zealous for good works out of gratitude. In addition, the pure preaching of the gospel will include the instruction that true faith, which is union with Christ, always is fruitful in a life of good works.

Orthodoxy produces *orthopraxy*, to use the word of the questioner.

In addition, one of the marks of the true church is the exercise of Christian discipline “in punishing of sin.”³ Faithful exercise of discipline, with the admonitions that accompany discipline, which indeed are part of it, will preserve the orthodox church from dead orthodoxy and will serve to maintain godliness of life in the church.

The trouble with Sardis, therefore, was not simply that the congregation practiced wicked deeds. The imperfect works with which Christ charged her were the failure of the minister to preach boldly and gladly the gospel of salvation by faith alone, or, perhaps, his corrupting the gospel of grace, and the failure of the elders to discipline wickedness of life on the part of some of the members. The result was dead orthodoxy—a merely formal profession of the gospel, shown to be dead by ungodliness of life.

One does not accomplish zeal for holiness of life by muzzling, or subduing, much less corrupting, the preaching of the gospel of grace.

13. What do we say of the Ethiopian eunuch? He went back to Ethiopia, not back to Jerusalem [Acts 8:26–40].

In those early days of the New Testament church, the gospel was spread to the nations by the witness of such as the Ethiopian eunuch. Having been brought to faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ by the preaching of Philip, the eunuch went on to his homeland in Ethiopia as an evangelist. The salvation of the eunuch, consisting of bringing the proselyte into a knowledge of the fulfillment of Isaiah 53 in Jesus the Christ, was at the same time the ordination of the eunuch as an evangelist. By his evangelistic witness to Jesus, the eunuch would gather and institute a true church in that land. There was, therefore, not even in that incident in the early and unusual time of the church a despising of the church institute.

In his commentary on the event recorded in Acts 8, Calvin wrote:

3 Belgic Confession 29, in *ibid.*, 3:419.

Luke passes on to a different episode, viz. how the Gospel reached the Ethiopians. For although he reports the conversion of only one man to the faith of Christ, yet because he [the Ethiopian eunuch] had great authority and power in the whole kingdom, his faith could breathe its fragrance far and wide. For we know that the Gospel grew from frail beginnings; and the power of the Spirit shone the clearer in the fact that one grain of seed filled a wide region in a short space of time.⁴

14. What should elders say when a daughter of a congregation asks for her membership papers to be sent to her because she has married a man who does not desire to join the congregation but wishes to remain Christian Reformed? Is the Christian Reformed Church a false church or in the process of becoming a false church?

The elders should have been working with this member of their church long before she asks to be dismissed from the congregation. Either they observed that the young lady was dating a Christian Reformed man, and was in danger of leaving the Protestant Reformed churches, or the parents would have informed the elders and asked the elders to work with their daughter. The message that the elders would have brought to the young lady is the solemn truth of article 28 of the Belgic Confession:

No person...ought to withdraw himself [herself], to live in a separate state from it [a true church as identified by the marks]; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it...[and that] all those who separate themselves from the same... act contrary to the ordinance of God.

The elders would have urged upon her the seriousness of leaving: “Out of it [a true church] there is no salvation.”⁵

The elders need not pass judgment on the Christian Reformed Church that the Christian Reformed Church is a false church in their admonition of the female in their congregation. Convinced by

4 John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 1:243.

5 Belgic Confession 28, in *ibid.*, 3:417–18.

the presence of the marks that the Protestant Reformed Churches are true churches of Christ, they may simply exhort the young lady that she may not leave a true church for the sake of a husband. So serious is the matter of church membership that even the suspicion that a church is losing the marks of the true church and taking on the marks of the false church is reason not to contemplate leaving a true church for such a church.

Then there is at least solid reason to judge the Christian Reformed Church as an apostatizing body, that is, as a church that is in the process of becoming a false church. In 1924 it departed from the gospel of grace as confessed and defended in the Canons of Dordt by adopting the heresies of universal, saving, but inefficacious grace; of the dependence of salvation on the free will of the sinner; and of the denial of total depravity of unregenerated sinners, which denial encourages the breaching of the antithesis between believer and unbeliever (the common grace decisions). Since then the Christian Reformed Church has officially (synodically) approved the heresy of universal atonement and the heresy of the rejection of predestination. With regard to the Christian life, the Christian Reformed Church has officially approved the adultery of divorce (for any reason) and subsequent remarriage.

Those decisions and others necessarily also adversely affect the mark of the right administration of the sacraments and the mark of the exercise of Christian discipline. Concerning the latter mark, in 1924 the Christian Reformed Church disciplined orthodox, holy men and women for their confession of the truth of the gospel. Today that church refuses to discipline egregious heretics and members who live impenitently in gross, public sins, for example, adultery and sodomy. How this corrupts the celebration of the sacraments is obvious.

How far the Christian Reformed Church has fallen away from the gospel, and from Christ in the gospel, is plain to all from the fact that in 2016 her synod seriously debated, at length, whether to approve sodomite and lesbian “marriages.” Now this depravity, so far from having been condemned, is a matter of study by a synodical committee! Awful, and decisive against a member of a true church contemplating joining that church, as against believers remaining in that church, is that in light of Romans 1:18–32, God is at work

upon the Christian Reformed Church to harden her in her rebellion against the truth by giving her over to a reprobate, sodomite mind and practice.

15. What do you see as the most pressing, or dangerous, or most likely route of apostasy in the Protestant Reformed Churches?

As I stated and explained at the conclusion of my lecture, I regard complacency as a danger in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Where no express denial of the truth of the gospel, no obvious corruption of the sacraments, and no flagrant abuse of discipline can be charged, there complacency threatens all the marks. Complacency is the foolish, sinful notion that because the churches have held and contended for the truth in the past, there is no need to contend for the truth at present or to be vigilant that love of the truth not cool in the future (see Matt. 24:12). Complacency regarding doctrine takes form in failure, if not outright refusal, to preach vigorously and sharply the doctrines of grace confessed in the Canons, warning at the same time against the heresies opposed to these doctrines, because “all is well with us today in this respect.” This complacency regarding preaching the doctrines of grace extends to virtual silence concerning the *development* of them in the Protestant Reformed Churches: the doctrine of particular grace, in opposition to the heresy of the well-meant offer, and the doctrine of the unconditional covenant, in opposition to the heresy of a conditional covenant. This silence is defended with the response, “All is well with us in this regard.”

Adding to the evil of this complacency regarding the preaching (and writing) is that developments of the heresies concerning particular grace and the unconditional covenant in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches make the Protestant Reformed testimony to these truths imperative in our day.

Complacency affects discipline particularly in this way: elders are not, and do not consider it necessary for them to be, vigilant with regard to the preaching. As I noted in the lecture, almost the first requirement for a bishop, which includes both the teaching and the ruling elder, is that he be “vigilant” (1 Tim. 3:2). The elder who is vigilant is always watchful that the preaching be sound and that the oversight of both the preaching and the life of the church be diligent.

A church that was once true can fall away.

A Protestant Reformed minister can err, whether by carelessness or of purpose.

Another aspect of complacency is unsound ecumenicity. Unsound ecumenicity is close relations, whether official or unofficial, with churches with whom the Protestant Reformed Churches are not one in the truth on the basis of genuine oneness of confession of the three forms of unity. Invariably, this unsound ecumenicity proceeds further without resolving the fundamental differences or even seriously discussing them.

The justification of these relations is that the Protestant Reformed Churches will be able to influence the churches that have corrupted the pure Reformed doctrines of the creeds, for example, the sovereign particularity of grace by all those who hold to the well-meant offer; the gracious, unconditional covenant by all those who hold to a conditional covenant with all the baptized infants of believers alike; and the gospel truth of justification by faith alone by all those churches that promote or tolerate the federal vision.

What this defense of unsound ecumenical relations forgets, to the peril of the Protestant Reformed Churches, is that ecumenical relations are a two-way street. The churches that embrace heresies are as liable to influence the Protestant Reformed Churches as the Protestant Reformed Churches are to influence them. To ignore this is complacency.

Two considerations ought to give pause to the ecumenical appeal to the possibility of influencing unsound churches. First, the proper way to deal with churches that espouse false doctrine is not ecumenicity, but polemics. Only when and if polemics has been effective in delivering a church from its errors does ecumenicity have its proper place. By definition *ecumenicity* is relations between churches that are one in the faith. Ecumenicity is not a means to convert churches; ecumenicity expresses the oneness of churches.

Second, the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches ought to be a warning against complacent, unsound ecumenicity. In the early 1950s unsound ecumenicity with the liberated Reformed churches came close to destroying the Protestant Reformed Churches.

16. If a consequence of unrepentant disobedience is being put out of the fellowship of Christ (excommunication), how does God

draw such a person back? Does God take into account the obedience/repentance of a sinner? How does one once again enjoy and experience the fellowship of Christ and his church?

I understand this question, indeed, several of them, in connection with the topic of the lecture, not as questions about church discipline in general.

First, the repentance of a church member who has been under discipline is the *way* to restoration, not a *condition* to restoration, as though it were a work of the sinner that deserved restoration.

Second, the excommunication of a member is indeed exclusion from membership in a true, instituted church and, as to its significance to all concerned, exclusion from the universal church of God (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 85).

There is a way back to membership in the instituted church for one who is, in fact, a member of the universal church by the election of God, which cannot fail. This way is the way of repentance, which is worked by the Spirit of Christ, using the discipline as a means of the restoration. One of the means that the Spirit uses is the warning of the members of the congregation. The members do not shun the excommunicated person, but admonish him.

Third, one experiences the fellowship of Christ and his church by the witness of the Spirit in his heart that, as he is repentant, he is forgiven and restored to the church by Christ the head of the church. This witness is sounded by the official declaration of the instituted church that the penitent sinner is restored and is to be received by the other members. The ultimate goal of church discipline is not to drive one out of the church, but to unite him again to the church from which his impenitent sin has separated him.

In the experience of the sinner, to be outside the instituted church is to be cut off from the body of Christ. His conviction that this is an intolerable condition motivates him to return to the church institute by repentance. The excommunicated sinner experiences that outside the church is no salvation.

17. Why did Naaman not stay in Israel after he was healed of his leprosy? He seemed to be a true believer, but the prophet even seemed to give him his blessing as he went back to Syria. Was it different in the Old Testament?

The history that occasioned this vexed question is found in 2 Kings 5.

Naaman the Syrian leper was a child of God. God cleansed him both of his leprosy and of the defiling, destroying, spiritual sickness of sin of which physical leprosy was a symbol. He came to know Jehovah God and was determined, even in Syria, to worship him alone on holy ground. For even the appearance of participating in the worship of an idol, he asked forgiveness.

The prophet did not rebuke him for going back to Syria, but bade him farewell: "Go in peace." Neither may I condemn the Syrian general.

In light of the different attitude and conduct of the Moabitess Ruth, who was determined, regardless of the sacrifice, to live in Israel and become a lively member of the holy nation, I may, nevertheless, fault Naaman for a weaker faith than that of Ruth.

The explanation of Naaman's conduct is, no doubt, in part the darker time of the Old Testament. The truth of church membership, like many other truths, was not so clearly revealed in the Old Testament as in the New. And as the old proverb puts it, God could draw a straight line with a crooked stick. He could preserve Naaman in salvation outside the promised land. It is not impossible that God used the healed leper as a witness to God in that heathen land for the salvation of other Syrians. Here the little maid of Israel in Naaman's house, who was the occasion of Naaman's journey to Israel to be healed, is the example of a faithful witness in a heathen land.

One thing is sure: the Old Testament account of Naaman is not the rule, even in the Old Testament, concerning membership in the true church.

18. How does the true church/false church distinction relate to the denomination, in contrast to the local church, which actually preaches, administers the sacraments, and disciplines?

The rule is that the apostasy of the denomination and the falling away of the congregations in the denomination go together. The explanation is obvious. A denomination is simply the federation, or union, of congregations. Apostasy in one or more of the congregations must spread throughout the federation by virtue of the union, just as cancer in a certain cell in the physical body spreads throughout the body. No more than cancer can be restricted to a particular cell or part of the body can the spiritual cancer of apostasy be restricted

to one or a few congregations in a denomination. Apostasy in a congregation must be dealt with as cancer is wisely dealt with in the physical body: no matter the pain and loss, cut the cancer out by removing the body part that is affected. Although the figure is different, the warning of 1 Corinthians 5:6 is pertinent, applying as it does to a congregation's tolerance of a wicked member in the congregation: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven." Just as one wicked member tolerated in the congregation will corrupt the entire congregation, so also one wicked congregation tolerated in the denomination will corrupt the entire denomination.

In the case of a denomination of churches, it is often, if not usually, the reality that the denominational organizations, especially the seminary and assemblies, specifically, synods and general assemblies, go bad and then, by virtue of their denominational influence, corrupt all the congregations in the denomination. The seminary produces unsound, doctrinally weak or unbelieving graduates as pastors of all the congregations. Synods take ungodly decisions that affect all the congregations for evil. Once an old, conservative pastor in an apostatizing Reformed denomination told me that in response to the wicked decision of the synod of his churches approving divorce for any reason, and subsequent remarriage, he and likeminded conservative pastors in the denomination comforted themselves that "we will keep the evil out of our own congregations." "Today," he added (merely twenty years after the corrupt decision on marriage), "every consistory meeting in my own congregation spends much of its time and a great deal of energy in dealing with cases of divorce and remarriage."

The denominational union is significant for good or for ill.

The denomination that notices a "liberal," or spiritually weak and disobedient, congregation in the federation, must take measures to expel the congregation from the denomination, sooner than later, of course, after admonishing the congregation. This calls for courage, which points out that cowardice plays a prominent role in the apostasy of a denomination. Synods do not dare to take an unsound congregation in hand.

The denomination has an instrument with which to detect the falling away of a congregation. This is the church visitors. This committee of

the denomination, carefully chosen on the basis of their wisdom and courage, examines the consistories of the churches in the denomination once every year. By prescribed questions the church visitors assure the denomination that every church in the federation is sound and faithful and that all officebearers are faithful in their callings. Alas, all too often this agency against apostasy in the Reformed churches fails because neither the visitors nor the classes to which they report take the visitations seriously. Again, vigilance is lacking, indeed, even the thought that vigilance must be exercised. About a congregation that everyone in the denomination knows to be in dire straits, the report “all is well” is given. A year or less later the church explodes.

A soundly Reformed congregation in an apostatizing denomination must leave the denomination, sooner than later, of course, after protesting the evils without result. Basically, this was the action of the reforming churches in the church reformations in the Netherlands in 1834 and 1886. This action too calls for the courage of the conviction that the pure worship of God, the proclamation of the gospel of grace, and a holy life warrant sacrifice and suffering.

19. How does one discern the purity of the preaching? Are there degrees of purity? At what point does one leave a church? If no faithful church can be found, what does one do?

One discerns the purity of preaching by the testimony of the Spirit of truth enlightening his mind in comparing the preaching with scripture and the Reformed creeds. Discerning the purity of preaching lies within the competency of every member, although it is the main duty of the elders.

Fundamentally, there are not degrees of purity. Either the preaching is pure or it is impure. Only pure preaching is acceptable. All impure preaching is intolerable and to be condemned. The main mark of the true church, according to article 29 of the Belgic Confession, is the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel.

There are, however, degrees of impurity. In the area of impure doctrine, a church first preaches that God desires to save all humans without exception—the well-meant offer—next, it denies reprobation; finally, it teaches that all humans will be saved.

In the area of the Christian life, a church first allows for divorce and remarriage in the case of the “innocent party”; then it decides

that remarriage after divorce is permissible in any and every case; finally, it approves sodomite and lesbian “marriage.”

One protests impurity at the stage of its beginning. If the impurity is apostasy in the doctrine of the gospel, and if, upon protest and appeal, the church assemblies approve the impurity, the member of the church is called either to join a true church that is not falling away or to institute the church anew in a congregation that has the marks of the true church. Wisely, Calvin advised patience if the weakness of a church has to do with the exercise of discipline. One should work at the strengthening of the weakness, but should not hastily withdraw from the church.

If no faithful church can be found, one should first reexamine his idea of faithfulness, to be sure that he does not confuse faithfulness with perfection. Then he must investigate whether there might be a true church in some far-off place, even in different lands, or he must try to organize a true church with others of like mind.

20. What if one is threatened with discipline when objecting to improper discipline? Ought one to leave or to continue to warn the church of error and risk being wrongly excommunicated? What if one knows of no other true church of which to become a member?

For a church to threaten discipline upon a member who is objecting to a discipline case as improper is, if the objection is properly brought to the consistory, a mark of a false church. The Belgic Confession expressly states that the mark of the false church is that she “persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke her for her errors...”⁶ Besides, the mark concerning discipline is that the true church punishes *sin*, not well-doing.

Difficult and potentially painful as it may be, the right way for the Reformed believer to respond to the wicked behavior of a consistory of threatening discipline in such a case is to remain in the church and continue to protest. If the consistory will not heed, the Reformed believer has the right and duty to protest to classis and synod. If all the assemblies are in league with the consistory regarding the evil behavior of the consistory, all take on a clear mark of the false

⁶ Belgic Confession 29, in *ibid.*, 3:421; emphasis added.

church. Therefore, if the consistory carries out its threat to punish the member for his well-doing, with the approval of the major assemblies, the excommunicated member may be confident that he has fulfilled his calling on behalf of the abused member and the church; that his excommunication was nothing but a piece of carnal vengeance; and that God will honor him in the day of righteous judgment and expose and punish those who unjustly excommunicated him.

With regard to the apparent lack of a true church of which he can become a member, let him make his need known to God, trusting that God will provide such membership to him. But his apparent lack may not deter him from his calling to protest unjust discipline. The old Dutch proverb applies in his case as in all others: "*Blind voor de uitkomst, ziende voor het gebod*," that is, "blind regarding the result, seeing regarding the command."

21. How are the three marks of a true church that you mentioned, and not others, determined biblically?

The biblical basis of the three marks that I mentioned is, in part, the following passages of the Bible. With regard to the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, John 10:27; Ephesians 2:20; Acts 17:11–12; Colossians 1:23; and John 8:47. With regard to the pure administration of the sacraments, Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:19–30; Romans 4:11; and 1 Corinthians 11:23–34. With regard to the exercise of church discipline, Matthew 18:15–18; 2 Thessalonians 3:14–15; and 1 Corinthians 5.

Apart from specific texts, the three activities of a church that identify the church as a true church commend themselves as the marks in view of their outstanding importance according to scripture generally and in light of the history of the church. That which has gathered the church in missions and preserved the church down the ages has been the preaching, teaching, and confession of the pure word of God. The force that has been destructive of the church more than any other has been heresy, or the preaching of false doctrine. Who can be ignorant of the reality that the church depends upon and grows by the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Attached as they are to the preaching of the word to signify and seal the word to believers and their children, the sacraments partake of the fundamental importance of the word.

And since discipline serves to protect and preserve the word, and the church herself by the word, discipline also shares in the importance of the word.

All Reformed and Presbyterian confessions agree as to which spiritual and ecclesiastical activities constitute the marks of a true church. These creeds are authoritative for all Reformed and Presbyterian churches and believers.

Noteworthy about the marks is that they are objective. Some persons err in judging whether a church has the marks, for example, with regard to the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, insisting that preaching a love of God for all humans is pure doctrine. But the reason for the error is not that scripture is unclear concerning the doctrine of particular grace. Rather, the error is the willful blindness to the truth on the part of the one who supposes that universal grace is the truth of scripture.

God has not opened up the vitally important matter of the marks of a true church to uncertainty by making the marks such subjective characteristics as a loving church and a friendly minister. Which is not to say that a church should not be loving or a minister friendly.

22. May we bring unbelievers into the church so that they can learn?

Believers may bring unbelievers into the church services so that, if God pleases, they may be converted under the preaching. Believers are encouraged to do so, perhaps their own unbelieving child, perhaps a neighbor, and even perhaps an unbelieving mate. Membership is limited to believers. Unbelievers may attend.

In 1 Corinthians 14:23–25, the apostle appeals to the presence of unbelievers in the worship services as a reason the Corinthians should not speak in tongues. “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad” (v. 23)? The verses that follow allow for the expectation that the word will convert and save the unbeliever: “falling down on his face, he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth” (v. 25).

23. At the end of your speech, you emphasized our calling. Does the layman have a calling to promote the faithfulness of his church? Does the layman have a calling to ensure the church remains faithful? How? You called us to vigilance. Can you be more specific what the laymen must do?

Although the calling vigilantly to guard and promote the faithfulness of the church comes primarily to the bishops, that is, the pastor and elders, it is the calling also of the members of the church who are not in office but occupy the office of believer. That vigilance is a characteristic of bishops is the teaching of 1 Timothy 3:2. First Peter 5:8 calls all members of the church to be “vigilant,” and that with regard to the threat of the devil who works with special energy on the church. Second Peter 2 and 3 call all the members of the church to be on guard against “false teachers” and “scoffers.” That all the members are called to ensure that the church retains the marks is evident with regard to discipline from the basic fact that usually discipline *begins* with the vigilant activity of the member of the congregation (see Matt. 18:15–20).

Every member promotes the faithfulness of his church by the very fact of his membership in that church. But this membership must be lively—attending the services of divine worship; serving in office when called; witnessing to the truth to the other members as he has opportunity; raising his or her family in the word of God; praying for the welfare of the church; attending such lectures as that which inspired this question; and more.

Every member also has the calling to ensure that the church remains faithful. He or she attends the worship services, not as what the Dutch describe as a *ja broer*, that is, one who affirms everything that goes on and every sermon simply because the elders arrange the service as they do and simply because the minister says whatever he says. Such a member is an uncritical “yes, brother.” But he or she vigilantly judges all the proceedings in the worship service and the content of every sermon, to assure himself or herself that all elements of the service are commanded by God and that the sermon is both orthodox and edifying. If elements are intruded into the service that are not commanded in scripture, for example, a choir, or the singing of hymns, or a sentimental plea for missions by a representative of the denominational mission committee, the member must protest

to the consistory and, if necessary, appeal to classis and synod. The same is his or her calling if the preaching is not the preaching of the pure doctrine of the gospel, or if unworthy persons are admitted to the Lord's supper.

Implied is that consistories, classes, and synods must recognize, not only the right, but also the calling of the members vigilantly to guard the faithfulness of the church in the matter of the marks. They may disagree with the member's fear and charge, but they may not challenge his right to have them and to express them to the assemblies. It is no small part of the hierarchy—and apostasy—of the Roman Catholic Church that it repudiates the calling of the office of believer, and thus the office itself, shutting him up, and that it gives over all the calling and ability of guarding the faithfulness of the church to the officebearers. "*Papa dixit.*"

24. If one leaves a true church and joins a church that is becoming false, can it be said that, insofar as they have left the truth, they have left Christ?

Yes.

25. How would you characterize the action of a young Protestant Reformed member who has made confession of faith in our churches, who then leaves a Protestant Reformed congregation and marries into another Reformed denomination? Is he or she forsaking the truth or merely joining himself or herself to another Reformed denomination?

No one should join a church, or be allowed to join a church, merely because his or her mate is a member of this church. Church membership is not as frivolous as this. Church membership is awesome and deadly serious. One must join a church because God is purely worshiped in this church, because Christ is present there, because this church clearly displays the three marks of a true church, and because one is saved unto eternal life in this church. One who joins a church (denomination) merely because "my fiancée attends this church" trivializes church membership and the church herself. I hope that my speech on membership in a true church, if it does nothing else, destroys this trivial attitude toward church membership and toward the church herself.

Regarding the question, if the other Reformed denomination that a Protestant Reformed young person joins on the occasion of his or her marriage to a member of that other denomination is orthodox in doctrine, so that the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached there, and if the other denomination shows the other two marks of a true church as well, there can be no objection to his or her joining the other denomination. But if the other Reformed denomination has corrupted the gospel, for example, by preaching that God loves all humans and has a sincere desire to save all humans without exception; or by preaching that God makes his covenant with all the infants of believers without exception, desiring to save all of them, but that the actual salvation of the children is conditioned on their faith and obedience; or by preaching that justification is by faith and works, the young person who forsakes the Protestant Reformed Churches forsakes the truth and Jesus Christ, whom the truth reveals and honors, as well as breaks the vow he or she made at confession of faith.

If, in addition, the church joined by the ex-Protestant Reformed young person approves the adultery of remarriage after divorce, thus defiling the sacraments and making a mockery of church discipline, the young person by his membership in this church makes himself or herself responsible for the profanation of the holy sacraments and for the damnation of the sinners.

Of this, parents must warn their sons and daughters.

Of this, ministers must warn their young people, especially when the young people make confession of faith.

Of this, the elders must warn the young person who is leaving the church when they work with him or her.

26. In connection with church membership, could you explain, or expound on, the importance of submission or obedience to Christ (head of the church) as the only way of fellowship with God the Father?

Jesus said that he is the only way to the Father, that is, to the one God, who is Father of the man Jesus and of all elect believers, and that no one comes to the Father but by him, Jesus (John 14:6).

Jesus is the way to the Father for his people by faith in Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ is the way—the only way—to the Father, inasmuch

as justification by faith alone is the only righteousness of the guilty sinner, which grants access to the Father and fellowship with him.

How this applies to church membership is, first, that it is in the true church that Jesus is proclaimed as the believing sinner's righteousness with God, thus giving access to the Father in the sinner's consciousness. The false church either outrightly denies or subtly corrupts the truth of justification by faith alone and, therefore, blocks the way to the Father, and salvation, to the members of this church.

Second, by way of faith in Christ, who is head of the true church, the member, having membership in Christ by his or her faith, has fellowship also with God the Father, whose Son and mediator Christ is. The member of a true church enjoys fellowship with Christ, the head of the church. Whoever has fellowship with Christ has fellowship also, and by this very fact, with the Father of Christ.

27. Article 29 of the Belgic Confession states that the true and false church "are easily known and distinguished from each other." Why, then, the middle ground in saying a church is becoming false? That seems to contradict the Belgic Confession. Also, does the "false ecumenicity" movement, what with super councils of churches, deny this article of the Belgic Confession? Is it even possible for members of such groups to have a right view of church membership? This issue seems especially pertinent, because of the Protestant Reformed Churches' apparent interest in joining NAPARC.

Although article 29 of the Belgic Confession speaks absolutely of the true church and the false church, with no mention of a church's becoming false in a process, it is a mistake to interpret this absolute distinction as ruling out the process of a church's becoming false, as though every church that has departed in any respect or degree from Reformed orthodoxy is to be judged as being absolutely false.

First, the practice of the Reformed churches' holding article 29 of the Belgic Confession at the time of the Reformation contradicts this absolutism. The Reformed churches did not regard all churches that differed with them on even important doctrines as absolutely false. They judged the Roman Catholic and Anabaptist churches as false churches. But they did not regard the Lutheran churches as false churches, even though they judged the Lutheran doctrine of

the sacraments as serious deviation from the truth of the gospel. The Reformed churches and theologians, including John Calvin, regarded the Lutheran churches as yet confessing and preaching the gospel of grace in important respects, despite their departure from the truth in the matter of the mark of the sacraments. The Lutheran churches were in the process of becoming false churches. The implication of this generous view of the Lutheran churches, which the Lutherans did not reciprocate, was not that Reformed believers might in good conscience join a Lutheran church.

Second, what the Belgic Confession's true church/false church distinction teaches about the church is that essentially all deviations from the gospel of grace, from the right administration of the sacraments, and from the right exercise of Christian discipline are matters of ceasing to be a true church and of beginning the process of becoming a false church. The distinction warns against regarding such deviations as harmless. It warns against viewing churches that have deviated from the marks, especially the mark of sound doctrine, in any degree whatever, as continuing faithfully to be true churches, in which one may safely remain or with which a true church may have what we call ecumenical relations. It warns against the notion of the pluriformity of the church, which I have explained earlier in these answers to questions about membership in a true church.

This leads to the second question, concerning the ecumenical body that calls itself NAPARC, North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council. This ecumenical body of churches would probably not deny the true church/false church distinction in article 29 of the Belgic Confession. But it would limit the distinction regarding the false church to the extreme development of the false church in the Roman Catholic Church and in the liberal Protestantism that denies such doctrines as the deity of Christ and the bodily resurrection. As for the true church, NAPARC recognizes as true churches those that are, or claim to be, generally "conservative." This designation applies mainly to churches that do not permit women to hold church office. Of all errors, the touchstone for NAPARC seems to be women in office.

The exception is the Protestant Reformed Churches. Although the Protestant Reformed Churches might be acknowledged as "conservative," leading churches in NAPARC do not recognize the

Protestant Reformed Churches as true churches of God, regardless that they do not allow women in church office. The United Reformed Churches (URC)—responsible for the disciplinary actions against the founding fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches and for the ecclesiastical decisions adopting the heresy of common grace of the Christian Reformed Church (of which the URC are the continuation, except for women in office)—thereby perpetuate the Christian Reformed condemnation of the Protestant Reformed Churches as false churches, regardless that the Protestant Reformed Churches may be viewed as “conservative.”

And the liberated Reformed churches make no secret of their judgment on the Protestant Reformed Churches as false churches inasmuch as they confess the unconditional covenant of grace. To these influential churches in NAPARC, the Protestant Reformed Churches are the one, anomalous, “conservative” false church. Because the Protestant Reformed Churches confess the gospel of salvation by sovereign, particular grace in the preaching of the gospel and in the covenant of grace!

The main and deadly serious error of NAPARC with regard to the true church/false church reality is that, on behalf of a false and dangerous ecumenicity, this organization and all the churches that are part of it approve fundamental departures from the gospel of scripture either as acceptable or as truth itself. Likely, all the churches in NAPARC, not only the United Reformed Churches, are committed to the false doctrine of the well-meant offer and the false doctrine of common grace. By decisions of their general assemblies, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America have approved the heresy of the federal vision, denying justification by faith alone—the heart of the gospel of grace. Leading men in the churches of NAPARC have openly advocated and defended the false doctrine that the days of Genesis 1 were long periods of time, thus questioning the infallible inspiration and authority of scripture and thus compromising the Christian faith concerning the origin of the universe under the pressure of evolution.

As for basic truth concerning the Christian life, all of the churches in NAPARC approve the adultery of remarriage after divorce, thus indicating the loss also of the marks of the pure administration of the sacraments and of Christian discipline. Indeed, one minister in

the United Reformed Churches publicly boasted of his remarriage after divorce, admitting that he was the guilty party in the divorce.

Thus NAPARC, despite any protestation it might make to the contrary, in fact denies the true church/false church distinction of article 29 of the Belgic Confession. It denies the distinction by legitimizing churches that display the marks of the false church as true churches of God. It denies the distinction by honoring what are in fact marks of a false church—or of a church becoming a false church—as marks of a true church.

